

A photograph of ancient Egyptian temple ruins under a clear blue sky. The image features several large, weathered stone columns and papyrus-bundle capitals. The architecture is made of reddish-brown limestone. The scene is brightly lit, casting shadows that emphasize the textures of the stone.

Light...

on a New World

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Nations in Prophecy

Iran

THE BIBLE GIVES us two reasons why we should be interested in Iran. Firstly we find that it is mentioned under its classical name of Persia, as one of the countries that will invade the land of Israel *'in the latter years'*. This reference is to be found in the book of the prophet Ezekiel chapter 38.

The second reason for our interest, is that the Bible uses a major incident in the early history of that country as a pattern to prophesy another event of the latter days, the way in which the kingdom of God will be set up on the earth. This pattern is found by reference to the prophecy of Isaiah and the book of Revelation.

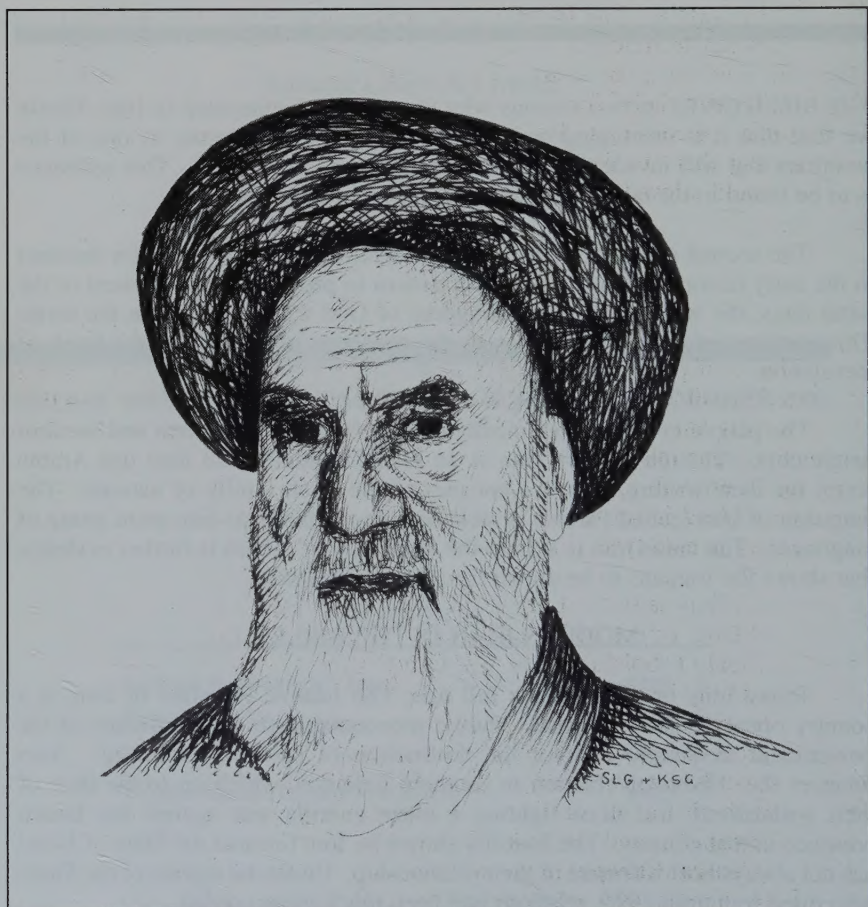
The people of Iran are ethnically diverse from their southern and western neighbours. Though modern Iran is an Islamic country and they use Arabic script for their writing, they are not part of the Arab family of nations. The language of Iran (called Parsee) is reckoned among the Indo-European group of languages. The name Iran is akin to the word 'Aryan' which is further evidence that shows the Iranians to be drawn from European stock.

MODERN IRAN IN THE BIBLE

Today Iran, or to give it its full title, The Islamic Republic of Iran, is a country openly hostile to Israel. Public pronouncements from officials of the government frequently call for the destruction of the 'Zionist entity'. Iran finances the 'Hisbollah' faction in southern Lebanon, which up to the time of their withdrawal, had been fighting a bitter guerilla war against the Israeli presence in that country. The hostility shown by Iran towards the State of Israel has not always been a feature of their relationship. Under the regime of the Shah, who ruled Iran until 1979, relations had been much more cordial.

In 1960 Iran was one of the first countries in the region to recognize the

State of Israel. Iran became a trading partner and was at that time the major supplier of oil but things were destined to change. After increasing unrest in the country which was met by an unsuccessful policy of repression, the Shah was at length forced to flee in January 1979. The leading Muslim cleric Ayatollah Khomeini who had been living in exile returned home in triumph and presided over the establishment of an Islamic republic but although Ayatollah Khomeini has passed off the scene, the attitudes he stood for are still in evidence.



Ayatollah Khomeini: Architect of the Islamic revolution who set Iran on a course of conflict with Israel.

Iran is a country that is rich in reserves of fossil fuels in the form of oil and natural gas. It has been a cause of concern therefore that the country in recent years has sought to develop a nuclear energy programme. For countries that have little in the way of fuel reserves such a programme is understandable but for a country with an abundance of oil to do so is suspicious. Nuclear power stations can be the means of producing materials to make nuclear weapons.

The technology for the Iranian nuclear power programme is being supplied by Russia. The Interfax news agency reported in January 1999 that more Russian technicians would be sent to Iran to work on the reactor at Bushehr. This was to be in addition to the more than 1,000 specialists already there. Russian help for Iran is also aiding Iran's long range missile programme. According to Israeli intelligence reports Russian scientists are in Iran helping them to develop a missile with a range of 1,500km. Such a missile would allow Iran to reach any part of Israel from a base on its own territory.

EZEKIEL'S PROPHECY

This is of particular interest to us today because it represents a situation envisaged by Bible prophecy. Ezekiel chapter 38 records a prophecy of a time which it calls '*the latter years*.' For more than 150 years Bible students have been interpreting this prophecy in terms of a strategic alliance, including Russia and Iran. These will mount an attack against Israel in the final days before the kingdom of God is set up on the earth. The prophecy, with some words of commentary in bold type, is set out below:

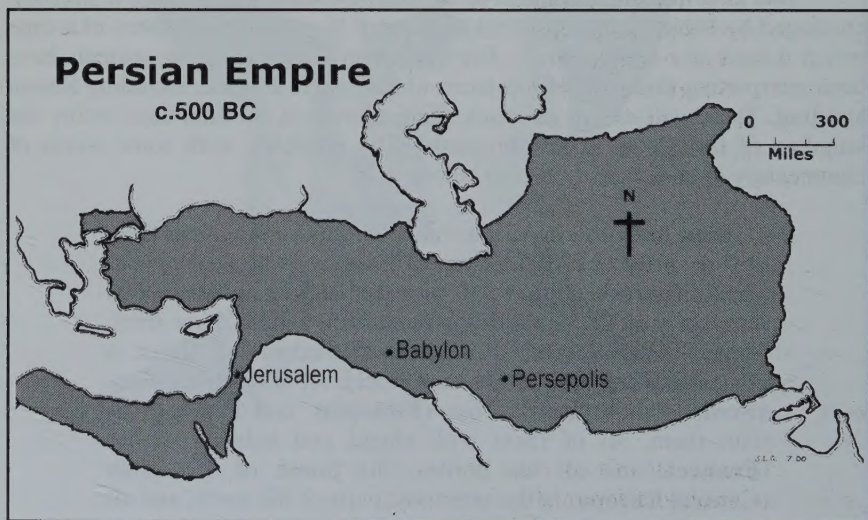
'...Thus saith the Lord Jehovah: Behold, I am against thee, O Gog, prince of Rosh (**Russia**), Meshech (**Muscovy**), and Tubal (**Tobolski**): and I will turn thee about, and put hooks into thy jaws, and I will bring thee forth, and all thine army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed in full armor, a great company with buckler and shield, all of them handling swords: Persia (**Iran**), Cush (**Ethiopia**), and Put (**Libya**) with them, all of them with shield and helmet; Gomer (**France**), and all his hordes; the house of Togarmah (**Central Europe**) in the uttermost parts of the north, and all his hordes; even many peoples with thee...in the latter years (**towards the end of man's rule on the earth**) thou shalt come into the land that is brought back from the sword, that

is gathered out of many peoples, upon the mountains of Israel, which have been a continual waste; but it is brought forth out of the peoples, (**the regathered nation of Israel**) and they shall dwell securely, all of them. And thou shalt ascend, thou shalt come like a storm, thou shalt be like a cloud to cover the land, thou, and all thy hordes, and many peoples with thee.' [Ezekiel 38.3-9 ASV]

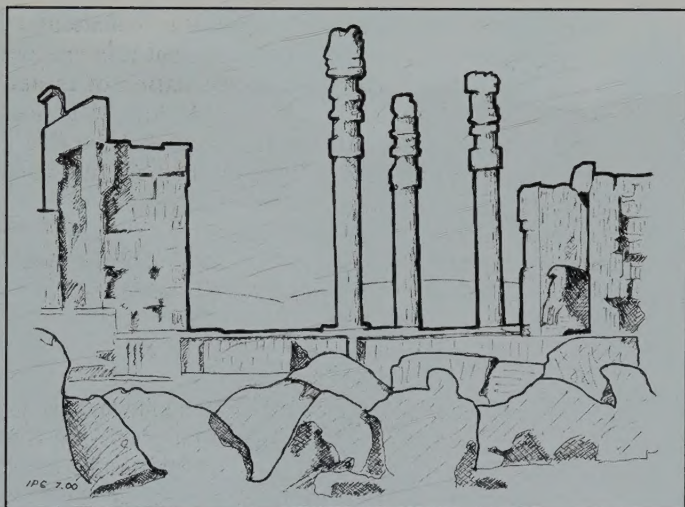
These events are the prelude, according to Ezekiel, of the time when God will intervene directly in the affairs of mankind. [Ezekiel 38.18-23]

IRAN'S HISTORY AS A PATTERN

In the year 539 BC Iran or Persia as it was then known, first appeared on the world scene in a dramatic way. Under their first great king Cyrus and in alliance with their neighbours the Medes, they overthrew the empire city of Babylon. They executed the king of Babylon and set up their own empire which lasted for about two hundred years. Their empire was to hold sway over the civilised world until the uprising of the Greeks under Alexander the Great.



— The Persian empire founded at the overthrow of Babylon, encompassed most of the civilised world



The ruins of Persepolis, Iran's ancient royal city

Both biblical and secular history record how the forces of Cyrus laid siege to the city. To the defenders of Babylon this seemed like a futile gesture. The city, they thought, could withstand an indefinite siege. The city was well able to feed and water itself from within its extensive walls. The river Euphrates ran through the middle of Babylon but this was to prove its downfall. Where the river ran through the walls, the area was defended by double 'gates' consisting of a grid-work of bronze that stretched across the whole expanse of the river. It was to be this very feature that was to prove the means of Babylon's downfall.

Unknown to the defenders of the city the forces of Cyrus were able to divert the flow of the river. They marched into the city along the dried up bed of the river Euphrates and through the great bronze gates that sympathisers in the city had opened for them. The city was taken completely by surprise. So sure of their defences had the rulers of Babylon been that they had spent the evening in feasting and merrymaking as recorded in the book of Daniel chapter five.

These events of two and a half thousand years ago were foretold by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. They were of interest to the people of Israel at that time because they had a direct impact on their lives. The essence of what Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied about Cyrus and Babylon is set out in the table on page 7.



The ruins of the city of Babylon, overthrown by the Medo Persian invaders under the command of Cyrus

Isaiah Prophesied:

- Israel would be taken captive into Babylon. [Isaiah 39.6,7]
- In due time Babylon's fall would come. [Isaiah 13.19; 21.9]
- It would be besieged by the Medes and Persians. [Isaiah 21.2]
- Cyrus their leader was called the Lord's 'Messiah' (Christ or Anointed One). [Isaiah 45.1]
- ...and the king from the East (or Sun's rising). [Isaiah 41.2]
- ...who would take it by means of the dried up river bed. [Isaiah 45.1,2]

Jeremiah Prophesied:

- Cyrus would decree the return of the Jews to their land. [2 Chronicles 36.22]
- ...and the rebuilding of the temple. [2 Chronicles 36.23]

THE PATTERN OF HISTORY AS A PROPHECY

The fall of Babylon at the hands of Cyrus, this figurative 'Messiah', is taken in other parts of the Bible as a pattern for the future work of Jesus Christ **the 'Messiah'**. Jesus at his return will likewise decree the return of the Jews to their land and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. This is the testimony of the prophets.

The book of Revelation (chapters 16 to 18) uses this pattern of events to symbolize the things that are to happen when Jesus Christ returns to the earth.

Leaving aside what these things might symbolize we can clearly see that many of those same features are there:

- The drying up of the Euphrates 16.12

- The unexpected coming 15.15
- The fall of Babylon 16.19; 18.2
- The kings of the East (Sun's Rising) 16.12

The lesson for us today is that the coming of Jesus to the earth in these latter days will be just as unexpected as the coming of Cyrus at the fall of Babylon. The Bible tells us about the confederacy of nations including Iran, which will attack and initially defeat Israel just prior to Christ's return. But as the prophet Ezekiel tells us, the confederacy will itself be defeated and destroyed through Divine intervention with the result that: *'...I (God) will be known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the LORD.'* [Ezekiel 38.23 NKJV]

The warning that Jesus gave to his disciples is even more urgent as the time approaches.

Concerning that time he said:

'For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

[Luke 21.35,36 NKJV]

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Basic Bible Teaching

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

YES, THERE CERTAINLY IS! Well that sounds a very confident start to this article but we have very good reasons for this optimism. This hope is based on the promise of God found in His inspired word the Bible. Consider for example, these words of Jesus just before his crucifixion:

‘....Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.’

[John 17.1-3]

Note the promise of eternal life in this verse. We do not have it now; it must therefore refer to a life that is yet future. We understand from this prayer of Jesus that the promised life to come is to be an eternal or never-ending life. There are many other parts of God’s Word where this future promised life is described. It is something beyond the wildest dreams of humankind. Here are some of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

‘For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth...And I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people: and the voice of weeping shall be no more heard in her, nor the voice of crying. There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days...for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands.’ *[Isaiah 65.17,19,20,22]*

This is a truly wonderful promise that is on offer to all who seek it. The Apostle John wrote: *'And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life.'* [1 John 2 v 25]

THE WAY TO LIFE CLEARLY SET OUT

Obviously faith is required because these are promises that relate to a time in the future, as we read in the letter to the Hebrews:

'...without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.' [Hebrews 11.6]

A life subject to God's rules is also required of any that would attain to this age: *'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.'* [Ecclesiastes 12.13] The promise will be realised, not by individuals attaining the reward separately at the time of their deaths over many centuries but the faithful ones will be rewarded together at the last day. In referring to faithful people of past ages, the writer to the Hebrews says: *'And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.'* [Hebrews 11.39,40] This hope is still held out.

Before this better day comes, there is this present life. We do not need a Dictionary to describe this for us, for we know that as far as its duration is concerned, it takes up that interval between birth and death and is filled with all sorts of experiences, some good and some bad. We also know that it is very brief, *'threescore years and ten'* as Psalm 90 reminds us, or if we really want to understand its brevity, 840 months! Can we repeat that? eight hundred and forty months from cradle to grave. No wonder James in his Epistle writes: *'For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.'* [James 4.14] That highlights the one certain thing in life - death. Unfortunately most people recognising these facts of life, tend then to think and say, 'well we only come this way once so let us enjoy it while we may,' or in the words of Scripture: *'take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.'* [Luke 12.19]

In recent years the effect of Evolution and its godless teaching of chance, combined with the other god materialism, has caused people's understanding

of a loving God to totally dry up and there is now a world-wide famine for hearing the Word of God which is able to save. As a result people laugh off the fact of death by saying, 'we've all got to go sooner or later' and adopt a resigned acknowledgement that there's nothing that can be done about it. However it is probably very true to say that no matter what life's experience has thrown up for them, if the opportunity to have another shot at life under different and more blessed circumstances were given, very few would decline the offer.

The rich, successful and happy person would welcome the opportunity to try again, to see if the past good experience could be improved upon. The poor, sick, oppressed person, would also like to try again under these improved circumstances, to see what happiness, success and plenty were all about. This perhaps explains why the Lottery is so important to so many people - they are striving to attain a better way now, even though all the money in the world cannot buy time and put off the day of death. As Solomon wrote:

'For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.... all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.' [Ecclesiastes 3.19,20]

'SAVE YOURSELVES FROM THIS UNTOWARD GENERATION'

We are reminded of Peter's words at this point, for here he tells us that there is something that can be done about the destiny that faces all mankind; that destiny of an appointment with death and oblivion. [Acts 2.38-40] That empty prospect can be filled with a future that is nothing less than perfect. Hearts and minds need to be opened to God's saving Word of Truth, for as Jesus taught: '*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.*' [Mark 16.16]

This was the message that both Jesus and his apostles took out into the world. Not a message saying it doesn't matter how you live or how you behave, because you will still end up in the same place. No, their message was very specific about believing the good news of God's coming Kingdom on earth and living a repentant or changed life in daily expectation of it. As they lived out their changed lives, Jesus taught them to pray that God's will should be done on

earth. No teaching here about a Kingdom in heaven or of a 'spiritual existence' but hope for a real literal Kingdom on earth, inhabited by immortalised people. These were the things they had to do in order to hope for the promised reward; they lived *'In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.'* [Titus 1.2]

A PATH TO FOLLOW

There are one or two important things to note with reference to beginning a life of living in hope. A reference from the Acts of the Apostles puts it all together like this: *'when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women.'* [Acts 8.12] We note the need to hear the message, to understand it, to believe it and to be baptised. The path is clearly defined and there is no short cut because *'faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.'* [Romans 10.17]

This was not a new message or a new hope. Abraham, the Father of the Jewish nation, had promises made to him by God about inheriting the land and in him and his seed all nations being blessed, because he believed God. Before him, Noah built the Ark in obedience to God's Word and saved himself and his family from perishing in the Flood as the Apostle Peter wrote:

'The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God).' [1 Peter 3.21]

Those were Peter's words when he was telling people how to live in hope of the better life promised and he is telling us the same thing.

A WAY TO LIVE IN HOPE

We will now refer to three other Old Testament characters who knew and believed the good news of a future kingdom of God on earth. First, the man Job whose patience under suffering is proverbial, who maintained his faith in God in spite of his wife's provocation to curse God and die, and he gave vent to his faith and hope in these words:

'For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me.'

[Job 19, 25-27]

This again is a clear testimony to his understanding and faith in the good news about the life to come.

David the shepherd, the giant killer, the man of God, expressed his belief and hope of standing on the Earth in the new life in the well-known words of Psalm 23: *'I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.'* His confidence was built on the promises that had been made to him that his kingdom under the kingship of his 'Seed' the Lord Jesus Christ, would be established for ever. From these examples we understand clearly that these things are to be brought about by resurrection.

Daniel is another great character who was told that as a result of his devotion to God's way *'thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days.'* [Daniel 12.13]

We shall notice from all the foregoing examples, that they showed in their lives faith and obedience that is well pleasing to God. In writing to the Roman believers in the first century, Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, had this to say:

'Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection.'

[Romans 6.3-5]

Paul lived his life in hope of the resurrection of the dead. [Acts 23.6] So clearly these things are to be brought about by a resurrection. The one who is to bring about this mighty work is Jesus, who is *'the resurrection, and the life.'* [John 11.25] When Jesus was on earth 2,000 years ago, one of his friends whose

name was Lazarus, died. Jesus went to see his sister with the intention of raising Lazarus from the dead. He said to Martha, the sister of Lazarus, *Thy brother shall rise again,* [John 11.23] to which she replied, *'I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'* [John 11.24]

Now the point we are making here is, that this woman, as a result of listening to the Lord Jesus, understood as had Job *'that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth...'* She believed the words of Jesus which are recorded in John's gospel record: *'this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.'* [John 6.40]

Consider Paul's stirring words about this future day:

'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.'

[1 Thessalonians 4.16]

When Jesus returns to raise the dead, what next? Well, there are some more remarkable and well known words found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

'Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold...We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.'

[1 Corinthians 15.50-54]

Life after death spoken of in the Scriptures, is God's plan for the redemption of mankind and is to be brought about by Jesus at his coming. This will mean the bestowal of eternal life on those found worthy of it - like the thief who was crucified alongside Jesus. His plea to Jesus is well known: *'Lord,*

remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.' [Luke 23.42] We note that he knew that not only would Jesus die but that he would be raised again and would come again at a future day in his Kingdom. The answer of Jesus is equally well known - though often misunderstood: *'Verily I say unto thee, Today (or this day - the day of his coming) shalt thou be with me in paradise.'* [Luke 23.43] Here is a reference to the day of his coming and of that day when the land of Israel will be restored and beautified once again. *'he...will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD.'* [Isaiah 51.3 RSV]

So there is life after death! It is not some vain hope brought about as a result of the imaginings of the human mind, but it is the intention of the Almighty God to be *'longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.'* [2 Peter 3.9] That is what we hope you will do, with the whole heart, in faith and obedience while there is still time and this hope of life is still held out.

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Acknowledgements

Black and white sketches

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Eureka private collection

Editorial

OUR COVER PICTURE illustrates the imposing entrance into the city of Persepolis built at the time of Cyrus the Great, king of Persia (550-529 BC). He was the son of Cambyses I, a descendant of Achaemenes and a member of the Achaemenid dynasty. When Cyrus became ruler of the district of Anshan, the district was ruled by Media. Within five years he had led a rebellion against the Medes including the capture of King Astyages and the overthrow in 550 BC of the Median Empire. Cyrus became king of Persia and ruled from the Halys River on the West, to the Babylonian Empire borders. Babylonia, Egypt, Lydia, and the city-state of Sparta in Greece joined forces against Persia but Cyrus defeated Croesus king of Lydia, in 546 BC and took control of Asia Minor. Seven years later he conquered the Babylonian Empire.

The 'City of the Persians' which is the meaning of Persepolis in Greek, is just one of the ancient capitals of Persia and the ruins are at Takht-i Jamshid, in modern day Iran. From the reign of Darius I in the late 6th century BC, it was used as the residential palace by the Achaemenid kings. The site contains the remains of several monumental buildings on a vast stone terrace surrounded by a brick wall. The palace and audience hall (Apadana) of Darius I are decorated with sculptural reliefs depicting Achaemenid court ceremonies. Thirteen of the Apadana's massive stone columns are still standing and its broad double staircase has been restored by archaeologists. Persopolis was plundered and burnt in 333 BC by Alexander the Great and eventually abandoned. The Persian Empire had been the most powerful in the world at that time, until it was overthrown.

Cyrus was an enlightened and religiously tolerant ruler. Among his deeds was the releasing of the Jews from their exile in Babylon, allowing them to return to their native Israel under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed by the Babylonians.

What it means to be a Christian

‘TWO TEENAGE SISTERS BEAT 87 YEAR-OLD WIDOW TO DEATH - DRUG ADDICTS COMMIT HALF OF ALL CRIMES - EX-PRIEST GUILTY OF SEX ATTACKS - STABBED BOY DIES - BRITISH TROOPS STONED BY SERB MOB - ISRAEL AND ARABS IN LAST DITCH PEACE BID - RAIL BOMB KILLS SEVEN...’

THESE HEADLINES WHICH are all taken from ‘The Times’ newspaper for Tuesday 15th August 2000 prompt the question ‘What is happening to the world?’ Quite apart from international problems, wars, terrorism, political unrest and civil strife on an unprecedented scale, social conditions seem to be worsening. It is more difficult than ever before to bring up a family, moral standards seem to be getting lower and lower and we wonder in what kind of a world will our children grow up.

Nearly two thousand years ago, the teaching of Jesus started a movement that was to have a profound effect on world history. Yet now looking round the world, you might very well ask - *‘Has Christianity failed?’*

THE CHRISTIAN HOPE

There is no doubt that Jesus, the founder of Christianity, looked forward to a better world. The prophets in the Old Testament foretold a time that would come when world problems would be solved and when all that is wrong with the world would be put right. The early followers of Jesus prayed for the coming kingdom of God when there would be no more wars and when all nations would be at peace.

Here are some examples of verses from various parts of the Bible which outline this hope:

‘...all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD.’

[Numbers 14.21]

‘...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’

[Isaiah 2.4]

‘...in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.’

[Daniel 2. 44]

‘...The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.’ [Revelation 11. 15]

‘For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever...’ [Isaiah 9. 6,7]

‘Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained...’ [Acts 17. 31]

THE HOPE GUARANTEED

There is no doubt about the confidence of the inspired writers of the Bible. They were absolutely sure that their hope would be realised. Some of the verses quoted above are coupled with an assurance or a guarantee. For example, the verse from Numbers chapter 14 begins, ‘*But as truly as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD.*’ The very existence of God confirms the hope.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

In the verse quoted from Daniel chapter 2 above, when the prophet Daniel was speaking to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, about the future of the world, he told him that the kingdoms of this world would be replaced by a divine kingdom. He then said, ***‘the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure.’***

The prophet Isaiah in chapter 9, foretold the coming of Christ in the words *‘unto us a child is born.’* After speaking of his future work to rule over a kingdom that would never end, he declared: ***‘The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.’***



The Acropolis in Athens near the site of Paul's preaching

Very telling too are the words of the Apostle Paul when addressing the Greeks on Mars Hill outside the city of Athens. He said that our hopes do not depend on gods made of wood and stone or silver and gold. Our God lives. He has a purpose with the earth. God has fixed a day when He will rule the world

in justice. He has chosen the king *'whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.'* [Acts 17.31]

There is no doubt about the reality of the **true** 'Christian' hope. Where people have made a mistake, is in thinking that the kingdom of God will be established by preaching the Gospel. The Kingdom will be set up when Jesus returns to the earth, as the angels promised when Jesus ascended to heaven:

'...this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.' [Acts 1.11]

Jesus promised to come again. He taught this in plain statements:

'...if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again.'
[John 14.3]

He also confirmed this teaching in his parables:

'... A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.' [Luke 19.12]

CHRISTIANS MUST BE READY

A realisation of the **true** Christian hope puts so much of the teaching of Jesus into context. His followers must be ready for his coming. He told the story of ten bridesmaids who were waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. Five were wise - they were ready for his coming - and five were not. Jesus explained that following him might lead to trouble. Father might be set against son and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever gave the impression that following Christ would be easy. The reward promised would be enjoyed when the kingdom was established, at his coming. At that time his promise in the Sermon on the Mount would be fulfilled:

'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.'
[Matthew 5.5]

Meanwhile the followers of Jesus have to try to live their lives in ways that will please him and this underlines the importance of his teaching.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

CHRISTIANITY HAS NOT FAILED

The teaching of Jesus was to be put into practice by his followers while they were waiting for his coming. The spread of Christianity was never intended in itself to reform the world. The world will be reformed, regenerated and restored at the return of Christ. Peter said that God would send Jesus Christ, *'which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began,'* [Acts 3. 20,21]

Meanwhile his urgent message to his hearers was:

'Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...' [Acts 3.19]

The reorganisation of the world will take place at the coming of Christ. The teaching of Christianity is for the followers of Jesus **now**. The time to repent is **now** - the word repent means to turn round - to try to change our lives with God's help. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, *'whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard..?'* [Romans 10. 13,14]

BELIEF FIRST

So, first comes belief as we learn from the letter to the Hebrews:

'....he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.' [Hebrews 11.6]

The jailer who was converted at Philippi said to Paul and Silas, *'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'* Their reply was: *'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.'* [Acts 16.30,31] The chapter then goes on to record his baptism.

BAPTISM IS THE NEXT STEP

Shortly before Jesus was taken up to heaven he told his disciples to go and preach the gospel in all the world. Jesus then said, *'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.'* [Mark 16.16] Baptism has always followed conversion.

It was a public testimony that the new believer wanted to make a fresh start. Because **true** Christian baptism is a complete immersion in water, it represents a complete washing away of the past and a new beginning.



The River Jordan in which Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist

BELIEF - BAPTISM - AND THEN?

There are many verses in the New Testament which describe the Christian way of life following baptism, with phrases such as:

- 'Make your calling and election sure'
- 'Continue in the faith'
- 'Continue in well doing'

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An excellent example of the order - *Belief, Baptism and Continuing* - is the description of the conversion of a huge crowd on the day of Pentecost when Peter spoke about the resurrection of Jesus and of the time when he would come again and his enemies would be made his footstool. We read:

'Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.' [Acts 2.41,42]

Note the order - belief first, then obedience to that belief in the witness of baptism, then continuing to try to apply the teaching of Jesus in our lives. This order is emphasised so many times in the Bible that it is hard to understand why so many get things the wrong way round.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

This is a common expression; yet so many ignore the logical steps as far as Christ's teaching is concerned. For athletes, the London Marathon is a race that has increased in popularity tremendously since it began. Thousands of competitors send in their applications to run in the race. All agree that it would be useless running the course, obeying the rules, completing the race - unless the runner had first been accepted as an official competitor. Paul argues in exactly the same way as far as our life in Christ is concerned:

'...if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules.'

[2 Timothy 2.5 NIV]

LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

From time to time, this magazine includes articles on faith and belief, on the meaning of baptism and the importance of how we should live our lives. The Bible is full of instruction about various aspects of the believer's life and what his or her attitude should be to the various problems of living today. The Bible tells us that whatever we do - we do it to the Lord. The life of the true Christian is not a 'Sunday only' affair but it requires, in a very real sense, giving our life to God.

‘...whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.’ [Colossians 3.23]

This verse is in Paul’s letter to the Christians in the first century that lived at Colosse. Paul writes in this letter about the significance of baptism which is a symbolic dying to sin and a resurrection with Christ, [Colossians 2.12] Paul continues, ‘If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.’ [Colossians 3. 1] This is where our hopes are centred - in the person of Christ who is in heaven, from whence we look for his return, because as Paul wrote:

‘When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.’ [Colossians 3. 4]

Then follows some practical teaching that we would do well to read very carefully. It is planned in a subsequent article, to link some of these points with what the Bible teaches about ‘*What it means to be saved*’.

However, the apostle then penned the words which we have already quoted, but he added a reference to his readers’ hope - the hope which is part of being a Christian:

‘...whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.’

[Colossians 3. 23,24]

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